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Rep. Cook Promotes State's Vo-ag Programs as Investment in Jobs, Economic Growth *Joined by Speaker Aresimowicz, Vo-ag Students*



Rep. Cook with Vo-ag students visiting the Capitol for Ag Day. Vo-ag students from Wamogo, Housatonic Valley, Northwestern, Nonnewaug, Ledyard and Southington schools attended.

State Rep. Michelle Cook (D-Torrington) held a press conference at the Capitol today to promote continued investment in Vo-ag programs at Connecticut high schools. The press conference coincided with Ag Day at the Capitol, an event where businesses and organizations in Connecticut's agriculture community showcase their contributions to the state's economy.

Connecticut has 19 agricultural science and technology education programs, known as Vo-ag programs, at high schools across the state.

“Agriculture is essential to Connecticut’s economy, and Vo-ag programs give students the skills they need to contribute to a growing industry right here in the state. This is an industry that benefits all of us – when people buy food locally they’re eating healthier and putting their money back into the community,” **Rep. Cook** said. “The programs at Wamogo, Housatonic Valley, and Northwestern High Schools have been a great resource for students from Torrington and the surrounding area. Particularly in this difficult fiscal time, it is crucial that we continue to invest in programs that fuel our state’s economic growth.”

“Connecticut’s Vo-ag program is not just about learning to work on Old MacDonald’s farm – it is a successful career-focused pipeline for skilled employment in a wide variety of industries that are important to our state’s economy,” said **Speaker of the House Joe Aresimowicz** (D-Berlin/Southington), noting Southington High School has a vibrant Vo-ag program. “Vo-ag is getting the job done, and stands as a model for how a career curriculum should work.”

Agriculture is a \$3.6 billion industry in Connecticut, with over 25,000 jobs in agriculture and related occupations. According to the State Board of Education, there are over 3,500 Connecticut students enrolled in Vo-ag programs. The state currently provides \$ 2,950 in funding per Vo-ag student.

“I’ve long been a supporter of Vo-ag education, and I think the students who go through the program are outstanding,” said **Rep. Arthur O’Neill** (R-Bridgewater/Roxbury/Southbury/Washington). “Vo-ag education has an important role to play in Connecticut’s education system.”

Vo-ag students are required to complete 200 hours per year in an agriculturally related work setting relevant to their career goals. In addition to pursuing higher education, students can be certified for skilled positions that do not require a college degree, including as veterinary assistants, fork lift operators and meat inspectors.

“I’m grateful for the opportunities that the Vo-ag program at Nonnewaug High School has given me,” Courtney Gibson of Southbury, a senior at Nonnewaug High School’s Vo-ag program in Woodbury, said. “Thanks to the support of my teachers, I found an area of study that I’m passionate about, and I hope to attend Cornell to study plant genetics this fall.”

“Attending a high school with a Vo-ag program set me up for a successful career as a florist and small business owner,” Amanda Berecz, a 1999 graduate from Nonnewaug High’s Vo-ag program and owner of Woodbury Floral Designs, said. “I couldn’t have received the specialized instruction that helped me choose my career path at just any high school. I graduated with the skills I needed to get me where I am today.”

“Vo-ag programs provide a direct link to successful careers in agriculture and agricultural science. Just as technical high schools are critical to Connecticut’s economic success, Vo-ag programs also prepare students to contribute to an important industry in our state,” Patrice McCarthy, Deputy Director of the CT Association of Boards of Education, said. “Rep. Cook has been a strong proponent of Vo-ag programs for years, and we appreciate her continued advocacy for our towns’ agricultural science students.”

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